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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to predict the future of composition instruction in college English departments, this paper first reviews the development of freshman English and the so-called writing crisis and then reflects on the ongoing argument over composition course content. The present state of the English department of a midwestern college is described in the context of a report of the results of a series of sentence combining experiments, the growing recognition of the college's writing lab, and the institution of a campus-wide survey of all undergraduates' writing ability. The results of the survey are listed, indicating that freshman English has a positive effect on students' writing ability. The survey results are discussed as the impetus for the English faculty's developing a six-point position paper. A forecast for future college English departments suggests the probability of an upgrading of and emphasis on the teaching of composition and the building of "true" departments of English and American language and literature. (AEA)

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English for the '80s

by

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The theme for the College English Association annual meeting in 1980 was English for the '80s: "Where Have We Been?/Where Are We Going?" Responding to such questions always has the enjoyment of the interesting challenge without the consequences or the risk of other types of publication. When one offers a wrong reading of a play by Shakespeare, there are other critics to pick up on your mistake, and your essay will stay on the pages of the journal to haunt you; but offering predictions on the future of English departments is a hallowed tradition and being wrong about those predictions is an almost equally hallowed tradition.

A number of English departments across the country, including Miami University, geared up in the mid to late sixties to offer the Ph.D. Reacting to a shortage of qualified English teachers and to the urgings of Don Cameron Allen in his book, The Ph.D. in English and American Literature, these departments saw their actions as a direct response to a national need. Now we face a future with a far different shortage--a shortage of college-age students, and departments of English across the country are attempting to respond to a far different problem--a glut of qualified Ph.D.'s.

I have recently finished serving on an ad hoc Committee on Student Retention at Miami University. One of our approaches to the subject was to document to the wider audience the increasing difficulty of or impossibility of treating the problem of retention through the old method of recruiting

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additional freshmen students to replace those students who do not return. Not only is Ohio itself an out-migration state, but over the past fifteen years the counties from which Miami University has traditionally drawn students have experienced a precipitous drop in the number of elementary and secondary students, and these smaller classes will start arriving on the college campuses in the early 1980's. So anyone who plans to approach the future in an optimistic mood must this time be aware at least of some of the demographic problems which will very dramatically impinge upon the colleges and universities in the next few years. For instance, if one is willing to base some of his or her enrollment predictions on historical patterns of applications and acceptances, then one can chart at what point the quality of the freshman class must decline if one wishes to keep the same number of bodies in the classroom. That administrative decision has important consequences for a department of English. Do we face at our respective schools smaller classes populated by academically qualified students, or classes of the same size, but composed of many more acadmically under-qualified students? If the writing crisis exists now, what will the future hold?

But before I look forward, I wish to look briefly at the past. I pick as my starting point 1939. The first issue of College English as a seperate, distinct journal appeared in 1939. That same year in volume 28 of the English Journal, College Edition, O. J. Campbell's famous essay, "The Failure of Freshman English" appeared. Campbell wrote, "I believe that the standard college course in Freshman composition has done much more harm than good, and that the greatest service that college teachers of English could render to their profession and to collegiate education in general would be to urge

the immediate abolition of this course everywhere."[1] Now there was no immediate dropping of the requirement, and at least a few challenged Mr. Campbell's attack on the course: In that first issue of College English Fred A. Dudley attempted to answer Mr. Campbell. In his article, "The Success of Freshman English," Professor Dudley wrote, "Accepting much of what Professor Campbell so vigorously says in his essay by that title, we [the English faculty at Iowa State University] yet believe that Freshman English is succeeding--not perfectly, but better this year than five years ago; and we expect it to succeed still better five years from now."[2] In the second volume of College English Andrew J. Green also challenged Campbell's assertions. His argument is based on the assumption that the current students desperately need the help offered by the first-year course:

> It must be remembered that this academic incubus, this 'Frankenstein monster,' was called into being and is now perpetuated by a want, a felt need, for a course designed to improve the student's effectiveness in writing. This need is almost universally recognized and is not to be eliminated by abolishing the course. Freshman English is ubiquitous, inevitable, and eternal."[3]

That last statement strikes me as a prediction that should be marked for all future generations. It places Freshman English on a level with death and taxes.

Mr. Green suggests two themes for the 1940's which should strike a familiar note for those of us teaching English in 1980. 1) Freshman English is ubiquitous. Although there were a number of schools that dropped the requirement in the late sixites and early 1970's, many of those schools have reinstituted the requirement, and a recent survey in CEA Forum of

freshman English programs across the country supports the idea that freshman English is indeed ubiquitous.[4] 2) There was, at least in the minds of many, a writing crisis then, and there is supposedly a writing crisis now. I leave to you whether or not there always is a writing crisis or if writing crises occur in forty-year cycles. I might mention that there were problems in 1929. Not only was there the stock market crash, but students were not writing well then either. Fred A. Dudley reported on an experiment at Iowa State. The Committee on Students' English had reviewed the writing of 149 juniors and seniors, using for this experiment papers written in regular courses at the University. Although I have some serious doubts about the validity of the experiment as I view it from the perspective of fifty years, the conclusions are interesting: "The Committee, at any rate, concluded that 'about ten per cent of the juniors and seniors habitually express themselves in language which would not receive passing grades in Freshman composition'; and that, adding to these the 18 per cent whose work was considered poor, 'slightly more than one-fourth of the Senior College students habitually write English which any department might reasonably refuse to accept.'"[5]

The familiar lament--familiar surely to us in 1979--was evident also in the 1940's. Theodore J. Gates ("The First Instruction in Composition," College English, 3 (1941-42), 64-69) wrote: "My own fairly close association with two middle western universities and with the Pennsylvania State College and my correspondence with many other universities and small colleges lead me to believe pretty firmly that much of the so-called college composition is not college work at all." (pp. 64-65). I am convinced that this article and others like it could appear without any changes in the journals of the last few years. And, of course, such articles have appeared.

So the first caution about any prediction of the future should be that if we are now in the future anticipated back in 1939, then very little has changed. Our problems seem still to be with us.

A second continuing debate that has occupied the energies of our teachers and the pages of our journals is the question about the content and/or function of the course itself. Now the problem was not one of a paucity of solutions. But agreement on the problem did not mean agreement on the solution. Thus, C. W. and W. A. Kerby-Miller can raise the question of the effectiveness of the course early in their paper:

> "Why is present teaching of composition so ineffective? There is one thing of which we can be quite certain at the start: that is that whatever is wrong with it is nothing trivial or superficial. A satisfactory revision cannot be achieved by juggling around the same old assignments or exercises or by new handbooks and collections of essays. In the last ten years literally dozens of 'new' courses have been worked out, and scores of handbooks, grammars, rhetorics, books of essays, and readings have appeared. Yet the protest against composition courses has continued to grow."[6]

And the titles of two articles in the 1955 volume of College Composition and Communication suggest the continuity of this problem: "The Problem of Freshman English: What Are Its Dimensions?" (John H. Fisher, pp. 75-78) and "The Freshman Composition Course: A Study in Shame and Glory" (Edward Stone, pp. 91-94).[7]

And one surely can not be heartened by scanning the pages of either College English or College Composition and Communication up to the last few years. It would be a monumental task to attempt to classify or describe the sundry individualistic attempts to teach freshman English that perfect way.

In summary, then, the present situation is not different from the past. There is evidence of a writing crisis or at least evidence that students do not write as well as at least some people would want them to write. There is continuing confusion about what the course should or should not do and how successfully it accomplishes whatever it is it purports to do.

With that background how does one dare make any predictions? Well, there is one very hopeful sign. I have noticed in the last few years both at Miami University and across the country a greater commitment to both the teaching of and research in the area of composition. That the teaching of composition is no longer the demarcation between those who have made it and those who are struggling to make it has to be one of the most salutary occurrences for departments of English in the last few years. It is regrettable, however, that one of the reasons for this change is the declining interest in and enrollments in the humanities, but whatever the cause, the results can be of long-range benefit. I have written on this subject before [The Department of English (Language and Literature), ADE Bulletin, 52 (1977), 20-23], and I do not wish to repeat the same points here. But certain things have changed at Miami University since 1976-77 when I wrote an article for ADE Bulletin.[8]

In 1976-77 three members of the department had received a grant from the Exxon Foundation to fund a series of experiments in the teaching of composition by the sentence-combining method, with control groups to receive the more traditional instruction. That same year the Provost had raised questions about the basic writing skills of the Miami University student and was asking what the English department, as well as the entire University faculty, could do about the "writing crisis." Miami's President Phillip R. Shriver testified in Washington about the woeful writing habits of the

average college student and proposed as one solution to the perceived problem a junior-level exam (he had in mind a machine-graded, multiple-choice exam) in writing proficiency. At the same time, the Writing Skills Laboratory in the Office of Developmental Education was underfunded and, in the minds of at least some of the faculty, identified exclusively with the Educational Opportunity Progarm, and therefore not available to all students.

Much has happened in the last few years, progress which I am happy to report and progress upon which some predictions for the future can be made.

The Exxon experiment is over, and the results are now being spread across the country through research reports at conventions and in journals, through a Conference on Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing held in Oxford October 27-28, 1978, and through the recently published textbook, The Writer's Options.[9] The results--to quote my colleague Donald Daiker--prove without a doubt that sentence combining is the single most effective method of teaching college composition. A strong claim, perhaps, but such a claim is based on a solid piece of empirical research, and those who would dispute the claim will have to counter with equally compelling evidence, not with just feeling and hope.

The second development was a belated recognition among faculty and students of the importance of the writing lab. Although funding is still not sufficient, the problems of recognition and visibility have been solved, and the problems now are accommodating the many requests for help.

The third thing that happened was that the department undertook a campus-wide survey of the writing ability of all Miami undergraduate students.

The question we wished to answer was what was the actual caliber of student writing at Miami University. With the aid of Michael Keller of the Student Life Research Office, we for two years administered an essay writing test to a scientifically selected random sample of Miami students. Although we are not prepared to make any definitive statements about the overall writing abilities of our students, we do feel that such a survey was a necessary first step in talking about a writing crisis. What is most important about the tests is that the results of the second Writing Skills Survey replicated the first survey. There are, then, certain conclusions that could be reached. After much debate within departmental committees and at two department meetings, the department was able to agree on a position paper on the writing problem at Miami University. The text of that position paper follows:

> Now that the results of the second Writing Skills Survey are available, we are better able to make specific suggestions for addressing the writing problems of Miami undergraduates. There are four specific conclusions which can be supported from the report:
>
> 1. The writing sample confirms that freshman English has a marked effect on student writing ability. Mike Keller has summarized the comparison between the performance of the sophomore class this year and their performance as freshmen last year:
>
>> The ratings which this year's sophomores received on the writing test were substantially better than the scores they achieved as freshmen ($p < .05$). Whereas more than one-third of the essays written by this year's sophomores were graded as good or excellent, only 12 percent of the compositions submitted by the same group of students as freshmen earned this distinction. Thus, it would

be reasonable to conclude that Miami students experience a sharp improvement in their writing skills between their first and second year at college, and it would be difficult not to give Freshman English major credit for this development. In contrast, juniors actually performed worse on the writing exercise than they did as sophomores, while the scores of seniors underwent little change from the previous year. Therefore, this study cannot conclude that students further improve their writing ability after the completion of their freshman year. In short, the findings suggest that the contact which Miami students have with Freshman English is the most important collegiate factor in bettering their writing skills, and that any improvement which a student has in the area of writing while at Miami will most likely be due to this series of English courses.

2. There is a distinct correlation between enrollment in 115 and 116 and success on the writing test. The present system of tracking students, then, does distinguish the more able writers.

3. There is a distinct correlation between the final grade in the second semester of freshman English and performance on the writing test.

4. Juniors and seniors did not score as well on the Second Writing Skills Survey as sophomores who have just completed the course.

Before moving to any specific suggestions, I must stress that no conclusions can be drawn about the overall writing abilities of Miami students. One cannot predict what percentage of students would fail a junior-level composition test required for graduation. The question of motivation for such a test is an important factor which was not present in the present survey. I again quote Mike Keller:

At this point, a word of caution is in order. The above figures do not necessarily reflect the writing ability of Miami students. Just because only 21 percent of this year's essays were deemed good or excellent does not mean that only one-fifth of the student body writes well. The writing samples are useful only as a device to compare the performance of undergraduates on the basis of certain characteristics, to ascertain whether one group did better or worse than another. To determine a person's skill in English composition would require a more reliable measure than a short essay which the participants had only a half-hour to complete.

That task of improving student writing is an all-University problem. The major component in the resources devoted to improving writing is freshman English, and it is clear that freshman English is doing its part of the job. The University, however, must see freshman English as only one, albeit the most important one, of the resources committed to the improving of student writing. Following are a series of interrelated recommendations designed to address the problems of student writing:

1. Strengthen the freshman English program by limiting class size to twenty students. Note: The Department of English has voted to accept no more than 25 students in any writing class.

2. Properly fund the writing clinic. It is already evident that students in need of remedial work can be identified early in English 111 and can be helped by a properly funded, professional writing clinic. But instructors of upper-level courses in all departments must be encouraged to require students with writing problems to seek help from the writing clinic. Note: Proper funding means a full-time director, two graduate assistants, and an adequate tutorial budget.

3. Enable the Department of English to continue to develop and to offer multiple sections of upper-level, specialized writing courses for the non-majors.

4. Ask the Department of English to offer seminars for other faculty in the assigning and evaluating of student writing. Note: Under the supervision of Dr. Gil Storms such seminars have been offered for the first time this fall.

5. Ask all faculty to assign written work whenever possible and to evaluate that work for the adequacy of expression.

6. Ask each department to insure that in at least one upper-level course required for the major a substantial amount of writing is required.

Finally, the Department of English recommends that the University not give a writing competency test to students during the junior or senior year. The University must seriously consider whether the time, effort, and expense of this test are worth it. The advantage of such a test is that it will serve as a reminder to the student that he or she must continue to write at an acceptable level. The disadvantage is primarily one of time and money, and that money and time might be better spent on the other suggestions being made. If the test is to be given, the Department of English will determine what students should be exempted. The University must also consider, however, what provisions will be provided for the student failing the exam. Two possibilities are a junior-level remedial course and/or required attendance (perhaps for academic credit) at the Writing Skills Laboratory.

I am proud of the department's position paper, because it is not the result of emotional reaction or defensive posturing to protect positions and territory, but instead is a reasoned response based upon objective investigation. We took the risk of attempting to investigate what we were doing. Before the results were in, I had nightmares that the investigation might prove that freshman English has a negative effect and that incoming freshmen (the test was given in October) would write better than graduating seniors, but my nightmares did not come true. There were other things that I would have liked to have proved, such as the beneficial effects of advanced composition courses, but the results were inconclusive, and that can wait for another time and experiment.

Now, if this is part of the present, what is the future?

Patrick W. Shaw has commented upon the idea advanced by some that separate departments of composition should be developed: "A major step toward regaining our respect is for the teaching of composition to be upgraded within the English department itself. There should be specialists in composition just as there are specialists in Milton. . . ."[10]

I for one am confident that composition departments will not develop as separate entities. I think first that the upgrading of the teaching of composition is underway. But what I think is most important to note is that the upgrading of the teaching of composition is intimately connected to the research emphasis within the field. The test, however, will come when or if the demand for the traditional literature courses returns. As long as the teaching of composition is something one does because one has to or because there are not enough literature courses, then there is always the possibility that a more rosy future for the humanities would bring us back full cycle to the attitude of the early 1960's. As young assistant professors fresh from

graduate school, I and my colleagues had one thought in mind--teach as little composition as soon as possible. After all had we not paid our dues as graduate students? Partly because I don't feel that the demand for traditional literature courses will return in the future--to be sure popular literature courses (the detective novel, fantasy literature, science fiction, film) will remain successful--and partly because I think a sizeable proportion of the present faculty and an even greater proportion of the new faculty--our present graduate students--will embrace the emphasis on composition, I predict that the departments of the 80's will be true departments of English and American language and literature. Teaching writing will occupy more and more of our time, but what may have been a situation forced upon many departments will eventually be one embraced by those departments. As we learn more about the composing process, as we learn what actually are the problems of composing for freshman students, as we understand more about the problems of teaching composition and about the even more nagging problems of teaching people how to teach composition, we will then lay claim to the parts of our discipline which have too long been ignored. There is much to be gained by this new emphasis. If we seize the opportunity, those in 2000 addressing the question of English for 2020 will not be able to look back to 1980 and say that the problems seem to be the same. If the problems have not been resolved by then, no one will be asking English departments to solve them.

End Notes

[1] O. J. Campbell, "The Failure of Freshman English," English Journal, College Edition, 28 (1939), 178.

[2] Fred Dudley, "The Success of Freshman English," College English, 1 (1939-40), 22.

[3] Andrew J. Green, "The Reform of Freshman English," College English, 2 (1940-41), 593.

[4] "Special Issue: The CEA 1978 National Survey of the Teaching of College Writing," The CEA Forum, 9 (October 1978).

[5] Fred Dudley, "Does Freshman English Take?" English Journal, College Edition, 18 (1929), 827.

[6] C. W. and W. A. Kerby-Miller, "What is Wrong with Freshman Composition," The English Journal, College Edition, 26 (1937), 625.

[7] I recommend one particularly cogent essay on the subject of the shortcomings of the first-year course--Leonard Greenbaum, "The Tradition of Complaint," College English, 31 (1969-70), 174-187.

[8] Robert Johnson, "The Department of English (Language and Literature)," ADE Bulletin, 52 (1977), 20-23.

[9] See especially Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek and Max Morenberg, "The Effects of Intensive Sentence Combining on the Writing Ability of College Freshman," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade.

Akron: L&S Books, 1979, pp. 81-90; Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing. Akron: L&S Books, 1979; The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. "College Sentence Combining: An Experimental Study." Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (October 1978), 245-256.

[10] Patrick W. Shaw, "Freshman English: To Compose or Decompose, That is the Question," College Composition and Communication, 25 (1974), 158.